The Three Turnings of the Wheel of Dharma

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Lesson 5:
Second Turning: Madhyamaka Metaphysics

Reading:
Nāgārjuna’s Middle Way, by Mark Siderits and Shōryū Katsura
“An Analysis of Conditions,” pages 17–29
“An Analysis of the Noble Truths,” pages 267–288
Nāgārjuna’s Middle Way

Mūlamadhyamakakārikā

Mark Siderits and Shōryū Katsura
1. An Analysis of Conditions

This is the first of several chapters investigating the concept of causation. It is important to note at the outset that in classical Indian philosophy causation is usually understood as a relation between entities (“the seed, together with warm moist soil, is the cause of the sprout”) and not, as in modern science, between events (“the collision caused the motion of the ball”). It begins with a statement of the thesis: that existing things do not arise in any of the four logically possible ways that causation might be thought to involve. The Ābhidharmika opponent (i.e., a member of one of the Abhidharma schools) then introduces a conditions-based analysis of causation, which is a version of the second of the four possible views concerning causation. The remainder of the chapter consists of arguments against the details of this theory that entities arise in dependence on distinct conditions. In outline the chapter proceeds as follows:

1.1 Assertion: No entity arises in any of the four possible ways: (a) from itself, (b) from a distinct cause, (c) from both itself and something distinct, or (d) without cause.
1.2 General refutation of arising on possibilities a–d
1.3 Opponent: Entities arise (b) in dependence on distinct conditions of four kinds.
1.4 Refutation of relation between conditions and causal activity
1.5–6 Definition of “condition” and argument for the impossibility of anything meeting the definition

1.7–10 Refutations of each of the four conditions

1.11–14 Refutation of thesis that effect arises from conditions

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\textit{na svato nāpi parato na dvābyāṃ nāpy abetutah |}
\textit{utpannā jātu vidyante bhāvāḥ kvacana kecana ||1||}

1. Not from itself, not from another, not from both, nor without cause:
Never in any way is there any existing thing that has arisen.

This is the overall conclusion for which Nāgārjuna will argue in this chapter: that existents do not come into existence as the result of causes and conditions. There are four possible ways in which this might be thought to happen, and he rejects all of them. According to the first, when an effect seems to arise, it does so because it was already in some sense present in its cause; its appearance is really just the manifestation of something that already existed. The second view claims instead that cause and effect are distinct entities. The third has it that cause and effect are both identical and distinct. The fourth claims that things originate without any cause; since there are thus no causes, an originating thing could not be said to originate either from itself or from something distinct—it does not originate from anything.

We follow Ye 2011 and accordingly diverge from translations that follow the La Vallée Poussin edition, in reversing the order of the second and third verses of this chapter. (This ordering is clearly attested to by the Ākutobhayā and the commentaries of Buddhapālita and Bhāviveka.) On this reading, general arguments against all four views are given in the next verse. But in his comments on this verse Bhāviveka
anticipates by giving arguments against the four views. He says, for instance, that the fourth view would mean that anything could be produced from anything at any time, something we know is false.

\[ \text{na hi svabhāvo bhāvānāṃ pratyayādiṣu vidyate /} \\
\text{avidyamāne svabhāve parabhāvo na vidyate} \]

2. The intrinsic nature of existents does not exist in the conditions, etc.

The intrinsic nature not occurring, neither is extrinsic nature found.

According to the Akutobhayā, 2ab gives the argument against the first possibility mentioned in verse 1, that an existent arises from itself (the view known as satkāryavāda). The argument is that if that out of which the existent arose were really that existent itself, then it should have the intrinsic nature (svabhāva) of the existent. But this is simply not the case. Indeed as all the other commentators point out, if this were the case, then arising would be pointless. For instance we want to know the cause of fire because we want to produce something with its intrinsic nature, heat. If that nature were already present in its cause, then it would be pointless to produce fire. For then in order to feel heat we would only need to touch unignited fuel.

Again according to the Akutobhayā, 2cd gives the argument against the second possibility mentioned in verse 1, that an existent arises from something distinct from itself (asatkāryavāda). This would mean that the existent must borrow its nature from its cause, thus making its nature something that is extrinsic (parabhāva). The argument is that in the absence of the intrinsic nature of the existent in question, its extrinsic nature is likewise not to be found. This is because in order for something to exist, its intrinsic nature must occur: There is, for instance, no fire without the occurrence of heat. And something
cannot be in the position of borrowing a nature from something else unless it exists. So an existent cannot arise from something distinct. (For more on satkāryavāda and asatkāryavāda see chapters 10 and 20.)

The third possibility is to be rejected on the grounds that it inherits all the faults of the first and second. And according to the Akutobhayā, the fourth is false because it is one of the extreme views rejected by the Buddha. (Other commentators give more philosophically respectable reasons to reject this view.)

catvāraḥ pratyayā hetur ārambaṇam anantaram |
tathaivādhipateyam ca pratyayo nāsti pañcamah || 3 ||

3. [The opponent:] There are four conditions: the primary cause, the objective support, the proximate condition, and of course the dominant condition; there is no fifth condition.

The commentators represent this as the view of a Buddhist opponent, someone who holds the second of the four possible views about the relation between cause and effect mentioned in verse 1. Candrakīrti has this opponent begin by rehearsing the reasons for rejecting the first, third, and fourth views. On the first, origination would be pointless, since the desired effect would already exist. We seek knowledge of causes because we find ourselves wanting to produce something that does not currently exist. The third view is to be rejected because it is the conjunction of the first and second, and we already know that the first is false. The fourth view, that of causelessness, is one of the absurd extremes said to be false by the Buddha (M I.408, A I.173). But, the opponent claims, the second view was taught by the Buddha and so should not be rejected.

The classification of four kinds of condition is the Abhidharma elaboration of the Buddha’s teaching of origination. (See AKB 2.64a.)
(1) The primary cause is that from which the effect is thought to have
been produced—for example, the seed in the case of a sprout. (2) Only a cognition has an objective support, namely its intentional object, that of which it is conscious. A visual cognition has a color-and-shape dharma as its objective support, an auditory cognition has a sound, etc. (3) The proximate condition is that entity or event that immediately precedes the effect and that cedes its place to the effect. (4) The dominant condition is that without which the effect would not arise. After criticizing the basic notion of causation, Nāgārjuna will take up each of these four types in turn: primary cause in verse 7, objective support in verse 8, proximate condition in verse 9, and dominant condition in verse 10.

Candrakīrīti sets the stage for verse 4 by having the opponent answer the question raised by 2cd as follows: “Then, given such a refutation of the view that origination is by means of conditions, the view will be entertained that origination is by means of an action (kṛiyā). The conditions such as vision and color-and-shape do not directly cause consciousness [as effect]. But conditions are so called because they result in a consciousness-producing action. And this action produces consciousness. Thus consciousness is produced by a condition-possessing, consciousness-producing action, not by conditions, as porridge [is produced] by the action of cooking” (LVP p. 79).

\[
\text{kṛiyā na pratya\text{\text{y}}avatī nāpratya\text{\text{y}}avatī kṛiyā } \\
\text{pratya\text{\text{y}}ā nākṛiyāvantah kṛiyāvantāś ca sany uta } \|4\| \\
\]

4. An action does not possess conditions; nor is it devoid of conditions.
   Conditions are not devoid of an action; neither are they provided with an action.

This “action” is supposed to be the causal activity that makes the cause and conditions produce the right kind of effect. It is supposed to explain why only when a seed is planted in warm moist soil does a sprout appear (and why a sprout doesn’t arise from a stone). But if this
action is the product of the co-occurrence of the conditions, and thus may be said to possess the conditions, then presumably it occurs when these conditions are assembled. But is this before or after the effect has arisen? If before, then it does not perform the producing activity that makes an event an action. If after, then since the effect has already been produced, the producing activity is no longer to be found. And, adds Candrakīrti, there is no third time when the effect is undergoing production, since that would require that the effect be simultaneously existent and nonexistent, which is a contradictory state.

If, on the other hand, one were to say that the action occurs independently of the conditions, then we would be unable to explain why the productive action takes place at one time and not at others. The action, being free of dependence on conditions, would be forever occurring, and all such undertakings as trying to make a fire would be pointless.

Given that one cannot specify a time when this action occurs, it follows that it does not ultimately exist. And from this it follows that it cannot be ultimately true that conditions either possess an action or do not possess an action.

5. They are said to be conditions when something arises dependent on them. When something has not arisen, why then are they not nonconditions?

6. Something cannot be called a condition whether the object [that is the supposed effect] is not yet existent or already existent.
If nonexistent, what is it the condition of? And if existent, what is the point of the condition?

These two verses explain in greater detail the argument of verse 4. The supposed conditions for the arising of a visual cognition—functioning eyes, presence of an object, light, and so on—cannot be said to be conditions at the time when the visual cognition does not yet exist, since they have not yet performed the productive activity required to make them be what are properly called “conditions.” But when the visual cognition does exist, no productive activity is to be found. We might think there must be a third time between these two, a time when the visual cognition is undergoing production. But while we could say this about a chariot, it could not hold of something ultimately real such as a cognition. A chariot might be thought of as something that gradually comes into existence when its parts are being assembled. But precisely because we would then have to say that during that process the chariot both exists and does not exist, we must admit that the chariot is not ultimately real. That we can say this about a chariot shows that it is a mere useful fiction.

This pattern of argumentation, which we might call the “argument of the three times,” will figure prominently in chapter 2. The point of the argument as applied to the present case of origination is that for those who hold that cause and effect are distinct (proponents of the view known as asatkāryavāda), the producing relation can only be a conceptual construction. According to asatkāryavāda, cause and conditions occur before the effect arises. To claim that the effect originates in dependence on the cause and conditions, we must take there to be a real relation between the two items. But that relation is not to be found in either of the two available times. As for the third time, it holds only with respect to conceptually constructed entities such as the chariot. It follows that the relation of production or causation must be conceptually constructed. It is something that we impute upon observing a regular succession of events, but it is not to be found in reality.
na san nāsan na sadasan dhamo nirvartate yadā |
kathāṁ nirvartako hetur evaṁ sati hi yujyate ||7||

7. Since a dharma does not operate whether existent, nonexistent, or both existent and nonexistent, how in that case can something be called an operative cause?

Candrakīrti explains that by “operative cause” (nirvartakahetu) is meant primary cause, the first of the four kinds of conditions identified in verse 2. A dharma is an ultimately real entity, something with intrinsic nature. The argument is that in order for an entity to perform the operation of producing an effect, it must undergo change, going from the state of not yet having produced the effect to the state of having produced the effect. But an ultimately real entity, a dharma, cannot undergo change when it exists, since its existence just consists in the manifestation of its intrinsic nature. Nor can it undergo change when it does not exist, since at that time there is no “it” to serve as the subject of change. As for the third option, that the dharma is both existent and nonexistent, the commentators explain that this thesis inherits the defects of the first and second theses and that moreover the properties of being existent and being nonexistent are mutually incompatible.

anārambāṇa evāyaṁ san dharma upadiśyate |
athānārambāṇe dharme kuta ārambāṇaṁ punah ||8||

8. A dharma, being existent, is said to indeed be without objective support.
Then why again posit an objective support in the case of a dharma without an objective support?

The object of a mental state such as a visual cognition is said to be the objective support (ālambana-pratyaya) of that cognition. To call this
a kind of condition is to say that the cognition cannot arise without its object. The argument against there being such a condition is once again like that of verses 6–7. At the time when a cognition exists, its supposed objective support cannot be said to produce it. Only something that does not yet exist can be produced.

Note that this argument differs from the time-lag argument that Sautrāntikas use to support a representationalist theory of perception. Both arguments rely on the fact that the objective support exists before the cognition. But the Sautrāntika argument uses this fact to argue that the cognition cannot be directly aware of what is called its objective support. The argument here, by contrast, uses this fact to prove that what is called the objective support cannot be said to be a causal condition of the cognition.

\[
anutpanneṣu dharmeṣu nirodho nopapadyate \mid
nānantaram ato yuktam niruddhe prayāyaḥ ca kah \mid 9 \mid
\]

9. Destruction does not hold when dharmas have not yet originated.

Thus nothing can be called a proximate condition; if it is destroyed, how can it be a condition?

The argument here is also similar to that of verses 4–7, only this time directed against the idea of a proximate condition (samanantarapratyaya), the third of the four types of condition. The proximate condition can perform its function neither before nor after the arising of the effect. A proximate condition must undergo destruction in order to bring about its effect: It would not be the immediately preceding condition unless it went out of existence before the effect arose. But before the effect has arisen, it has not yet undergone destruction. And once it has undergone destruction, since it no longer exists, it cannot be said to be productive of an effect.
bhāvānāṃ niḥsvabhāvānāṃ na sattā vidyate yataḥ
satīdam asmin bhavatīty etan naivopapadyate ||10||

10. Since things devoid of intrinsic nature are not existent, “This existing, that comes to be” can never hold.

“This existing, that comes to be” is one standard formulation of dependent origination, the Buddha’s doctrine of causation. The “this” in the formula is identified by the Ābhidharmika as the dominant condition (adhipati-pratyaya), the fourth type of condition mentioned in verse 2. The claim here is that there can be no such dominant condition for things that are ultimately real. The argument is that anything that did originate in accordance with the formula would lack intrinsic nature. We saw it claimed in verses 4–7 that there is no third time when an ultimately real effect is undergoing production. This is because for something to be ultimately real, it must bear its own intrinsic nature and not borrow that nature from other things, in the way in which a chariot borrows its nature (e.g., its size, shape, and weight) from the natures of its parts. And this in turn means that something that is ultimately real must be simple in nature. Something simple in nature either does exist or does not exist; there is no third intermediate state when it is coming into existence. Only things that are not ultimately real, such as a chariot, could be said to undergo production. Hence the formula “This existing, that comes to be” cannot apply to things that are ultimately existent.

na ca vyastasamastesu pratyayēṣu asti tat phalam |
pratyayebhyah katham tac ca bhaven na pratyayēṣu yat ||11||

11. That product does not exist in the conditions whether they are taken separately or together.
What does not exist in the conditions, how can that come from the conditions?
12. If that which does not exist [in them] is produced from those conditions, how is it that the product does not also come forth from nonconditions?

The argument so far has focused on the conditions. Now it turns to the effect but makes similar points. Here the view in question is that the effect is distinct from its cause and conditions. In verse 11 the difficulty is raised that there is then no explanation as to why this particular effect arises from these conditions. Candrakīrti gives the example of the cloth that is said to arise from the threads, loom, shuttle, pick, and so on. The cloth is not in these conditions taken separately, for the cloth is not found in the separate threads, the loom, etc., and if it were in each of them, then it would be many cloths, not one. Nor is the cloth in the conditions taken collectively or in the assembled state. For when the threads are assembled, the cloth as a whole is not found in each of the many threads that are its individual parts. Consequently the cloth and its conditions must be said to be utterly distinct. In verse 12 it is pointed out that it would then be equally sensible to expect the effect to arise from anything at all—that is, from what would ordinarily be identified as nonconditions with respect to that effect. (Cf. verse 3cd.) For as Bhāviveka points out, threads are just as distinct from curd as they would then be from cloth, so we should expect to be able to get curd from threads.

13. The product consists of the conditions, but the conditions do not consist of themselves.
How can that which is the product of things that do not consist of themselves consist of conditions?

Here the view in question is that the product or effect, while distinct from the cause and conditions, arises from them in that it consists in them or is composed of them. (The Nyāya school held this view.) It differs from the view in question in verses 11–12 in that it restricts the term “condition” to just those things that the effect can be said to be made of. The example used by the commentators is that of the threads and a piece of cloth. Now we can say that the cloth is made up of the threads. But it is not true that a thread is made up of itself. The thread is in turn made up of its parts, such as its two tips and the intermediate parts. But if something is composed of something else, the intrinsic nature of that thing should be found in what it is composed of. For instance the color of the cloth should be found in the threads. And the property of being composed of threads, while found in the cloth, is not to be found in the threads. A thread does not consist of itself; it consists of its tips and the other parts. So the view in question cannot be correct.

tasmān na pratyayamayaṃ nāpratyayamayaṃ phalam |
samvidyate phalābhāvāt pratyayāpratyayāh kutah ||14||

14. Therefore neither a product consisting of conditions nor one consisting of nonconditions exists; if the product does not exist, how can there be a condition or noncondition?

As verse 13 showed, the effect cannot be said to be made up of its conditions, since the effect could derive its nature only from things that do not in turn derive their nature from yet other things. The alternative would be to say that the effect is made up of nonconditions. If the cloth is not made up of threads, then perhaps it is made up of straw, which
is the condition with respect to a mat but a noncondition with respect to cloth. But this is obviously absurd. So there is no plausible account of the origination of a real effect. And in the absence of a real effect, nothing can be said to be either a condition or a noncondition.
24. An Analysis of the Noble Truths

The subject of this chapter is the Buddha’s teaching known as the four noble truths. In the first six verses the opponent objects that if, as Nāgārjuna claims, all is indeed empty, then this teaching, as well as all that follows from it, is put in jeopardy. In replying, Nāgārjuna first claims that the opponent has misunderstood the purport of the doctrine of emptiness. He then seeks to turn the tables on the opponent and show that what would actually jeopardize the Buddha’s teachings is denying emptiness, or affirming that there are things with intrinsic nature. In outline the argument goes like this:

24.1–6 Objection: Emptiness is incompatible with the core teachings of the Buddha—e.g., the four truths and the three jewels—as well as with ordinary modes of conduct.

24.7 Reply: The opponent misunderstands emptiness.

24.8–10 The opponent does not understand the distinction between the two truths.

24.11–12 The Buddha hesitated to teach emptiness for fear of its being misunderstood.

24.13–15 Assertion: The faults pointed out by the opponent are in fact found in his arguments.

24.16–17 Reason: If things existed with intrinsic nature, they would not originate in dependence on cause and conditions.

24.18–19 To affirm that all things arise in dependence on causes
and conditions is to affirm that all things are devoid of intrinsic nature.

24.20–25 If things were not empty, the four noble truths could not hold.

24.26–27c If things were not empty, there could not be the four activities that constitute the path to nirvāṇa.

24.27d–30 If things were not empty, the three jewels—Saṃgha, Dharma, and Buddha—could not exist.

24.31–32 If things were not empty, then these things would all be essentially unrelated: being a buddha, enlightenment, following the Buddha’s teaching, and the path of the bodhisattva.

24.33–35 If things were not empty, there would be neither good nor bad actions together with their respective results.

24.36–37 The denial of emptiness means the denial of worldly conduct.

24.38 If things were not empty, the world would be completely static.

24.39 If things were not empty, then conduct aiming at attainment of nirvāṇa would also make no sense.

24.40 Conclusion: One who sees dependent origination sees the four truths.

\[ yadi \ sūnyam \ idam \ sarvam \ udayo \ nāsti \ na \ vyayaḥ \ |
\] \[ caturṇām \ āryasatyānām \ abbāvas \ te \ prasajyate \ ||1|| \]

1. [Objection:] If all this is empty, there is neither origination nor cessation.

It follows for you that there is the nonexistence of the four noble truths.
If all is empty, then there is nothing that is ultimately real. In that case it cannot be ultimately true that things such as suffering undergo origination and destruction. But the second noble truth claims that suffering arises in dependence on causes and conditions, while the third noble truth claims that suffering ceases when these causes and conditions are stopped. So if all things are empty, these claims cannot be ultimately true.

2. Comprehension, abandonment, practice, and personal realization—none of these is possible due to nonexistence of the four noble truths.

The four activities mentioned here represent the basic constituents of the Buddha’s path or program leading to the cessation of suffering. By “comprehension” is meant the clear understanding of suffering (the first noble truth). “Abandonment” means bringing to an end the attachments that are the chief cause of suffering (the second noble truth being that suffering has a cause). “Practice” refers to practicing the path to the cessation of suffering (the third noble truth being that there is the cessation of suffering). And “personal realization” means completion of the path to nirvana or cessation (the fourth noble truth being that there is such a path). The opponent is here claiming that these four activities could lead to that result only if the four noble truths represent an accurate assessment of the fundamental nature of reality. So the doctrine of emptiness would entail that the Buddha’s teachings are not effective.
3. And due to the nonexistence of those, the four noble fruits [of stream-winner, once-returner, never-returner, and arhat] do not exist. If the fruits are nonexistent, then there are neither the strivers for nor the attainers of those fruits.

If the path does not lead to the cessation of suffering, then no one has ever strived for or attained any of the four states of stream-winner and so on. These represent different degrees of proximity to final cessation or exhaustion of rebirth.

\[ saṃgho nāsti na cet santi te 'ṣṭau puruṣapudgalāḥ | abhāvāc cāryasatyānāṃ saddharmo 'pi na vidyate \]

4. The Saṃgha does not exist if the eight kinds of person do not exist. And because of the nonexistence of the noble truths, the true Dharma does not exist either.

The eight kinds of person are the four types of strivers for the fruits mentioned in verse 3 and the four kinds of attainers of those fruits. The Saṃgha is the collective body made up of all eight kinds of persons. The Dharma is the teachings of the Buddha.

\[ dharme cāsati saṃghe ca kathāṃ buddho bhavisyati | evam trīṇy api ratnāmi bruvānāb pratibādhase \]
\[ śūnyatāṃ phalasadbhāvam adharmam dharmam eva ca | sarvasamvyavahārāṃś ca laukikān pratibādhase \]

5. Dharma and Saṃgha being nonexistent, how will the Buddha come to be?

In this way you deny all three jewels when you proclaim
6. emptiness; you deny the real existence of the karmic fruit,
both good and bad actions,
and all worldly modes of conduct.

The existence of a Buddha is dependent on the existence of Dharma and Samgha. A Buddha is someone who, having discovered the Dharma (the causes of and cure for suffering), teaches it to others and thus forms the Samgha. So if, as verses 1–4 claim, Dharma and Samgha do not exist if all is empty, then the Buddha likewise cannot exist if all things are empty.

Good and bad conduct are actions that lead to pleasant and painful fruits respectively. Worldly modes of conduct include such mundane activities as cooking, eating, coming, and going. All are denied, claims the opponent, if it is held that all dharmas are empty. The reasoning is that since nothing whatsoever could exist if all is empty, there can be no good and bad conduct, etc.

\[atra \ brūmah śūnyatāyām na tvam tvam pratyakṣaṃ / \]
\[śūnyatām śūnyatārtham ca tata evaṃ vihanyase \[\[7\]\]

7. [Reply:] Here we say that you do not understand the point of [teaching] emptiness,
emptiness itself, and the meaning of emptiness; in this way you are thus frustrated.

Candrakīrti comments that the opponent’s objection is based on the opponent mistakenly imposing on the doctrine of emptiness his own nihilist reading—that to say all things lack intrinsic nature is to say nothing whatsoever exists. Candrakīrti also states that the true purpose of teaching emptiness is that given in 18.5: the extinguishing of hypostatization.
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\[dve satye samupāśritya buddhānāṃ dhammadeśanā \mid lokasaṃvṛtisatyam ca satyam ca paramārthataḥ ||8||\]

8. The Dharma teaching of the Buddha rests on two truths: conventional truth and ultimate truth.

The term we translate as “conventional” is a compound made of the two words *loka* and *saṃvṛti*. Candrakīrti gives three distinct etymologies for *saṃvṛti*. On one etymology, the root meaning is that of “concealing,” so conventional truth would be all those ways of thinking and speaking that conceal the real state of affairs from ordinary people (*loka*). The second explains the term to mean “mutual dependency.” On the third etymology, the term refers to conventions involved in customary practices of the world, the customs governing the daily conduct of ordinary people (*loka*). He adds that this *saṃvṛti* is of the nature of (the relation between) term and referent, cognition and the cognized, and the like. So on this understanding, conventional truth is a set of beliefs that ordinary people (*loka*) use in their daily conduct, and it is conventional (*saṃvṛti*) because of its reliance on conventions concerning semantic and cognitive relations. It may be worth noting that when Indian commentators give multiple explanations of a term, it is often the last one given that they favor.

The *Akutobhayā* explains that the ultimate truth is the faultless realization of the noble ones (*āryas*), namely that no dharmas whatsoever arise. There are two ways that this might be understood. The first is that according to Madhyamaka, ultimate reality does not contain anything that arises. (And since Buddhists generally agree that there are no eternal entities, this would mean that ultimate reality contains no entities whatsoever.) The realization of emptiness would then be insight into the true character of reality: that it is utterly devoid of existing entities. According to the second possible interpretation, the ultimate truth according to Madhyamaka is just that there is no such thing as the way that reality ultimately is. Or to put this in a somewhat paradoxical way,
the ultimate truth is that there is no ultimate truth. On this reading, what the āryas realize is that the very idea of how things really are, independently of our (useful) semantic and cognitive conventions, is incoherent.

\[ ye \text{'nayor na vijānanti vibhāgam satyayor dvayoḥ} / \]
\[ te tattvam na vijānanti gambhīre buddhaśāsane //9// \]

9. Who do not know the distinction between the two truths, they do not understand reality in accordance with the profound teachings of the Buddha.

Candrakīrti has the opponent raise an interesting question for the Mādhyamika at this point:

Suppose that the ultimate truth is indeed without the hypos-
tatization of intrinsic nature. Then what is the point of those other teachings concerning the skandhas, dhātus, āyatanas, noble truths, dependent origination, and the rest, none of them ultimately true? What is not true should be rejected, so why was what should be rejected taught? (LVP p. 494)

Candrakīrti replies that the opponent is right about the status of the Buddha’s teachings, that they are not ultimately true. But the next verse answers the question.

\[ vyavahāram anāśritya paramārtho na desyate / \]
\[ paramārtham anāgamya nirvāṇam nādhigamyate //10// \]

10. The ultimate truth is not taught independently of customary ways of talking and thinking. Not having acquired the ultimate truth, nirvāṇa is not attained.
The “customary ways of talking and thinking” (vyavahāra) referred to here are the everyday practice of ordinary people, what we think of as “common sense.” This consists of those ways of getting around in the world that have proven useful in that they generally lead to success in meeting people’s goals. As the basis of our commonsense beliefs, it can be equated with conventional truth. So verse 10ab is asserting that ultimate truth cannot be taught without reliance on conventional truth. Candrakīrti likens conventional truth to the cup that a thirsty person must use in order to satisfy a need for water.

The reply to the above objection is thus that ultimate truth cannot be realized without first having mastered the conventional truth that the person is a fiction constructed on the basis of skandhas and so on in relations of dependent origination. The skandhas and so on are themselves conceptual constructions, but they turn out to be useful for purposes of realizing the ultimate truth. And without such realization, nirvāṇa is not attained. In short, what Abhidharma takes to be the ultimate truth turns out, on the Madhyamaka understanding, to be merely conventionally true.

vināśayati durdṛṣṭā śūnyatā mandamedhasam
sarpo yathā durgṛhīto vidyā vā duṣprādhitā //11//

11. Emptiness misunderstood destroys the slow-witted,
like a serpent wrongly held or a spell wrongly executed.

As novice snake-handlers and apprentice sorcerers can attest, serpents and magic spells are dangerous instruments in the hands of those who lack the requisite knowledge. (See the Alagaddūpama Sutta [M I.130], where the Buddha likens misunderstanding the Dharma to what befalls one who wrongly grasps a snake.) The same is said to be true of emptiness. Candrakīrti discusses two ways in which the “slow-witted” can go astray. The first involves seeing emptiness as the nonexistence of all conditioned things, while the second involves supposing that emp-
tiness is a really existing thing with a real locus. Both errors stem from failing to understand the distinction between the two truths, and both can destroy one’s chances of liberation.

\[
\text{ataś ca pratyudāvyttam cittam deśayitum muneh} \\
dharmam matvāsyā dharmasya mandair duravagāhatām //12//
\]

12. Hence the Sage’s intention to teach the Dharma was turned back, considering the difficulty, for the slow, of penetrating this Dharma.

It is said that the Buddha, after attaining enlightenment, hesitated before embarking on the career of a buddha—teaching others the Dharma he had discovered so that they too could attain the cessation of suffering. His hesitation was due to his realization that the Dharma is complex and difficult to grasp. In the end, it is said, it was the intercession of the gods that convinced him to take up his teaching career.

\[
\text{śūnyatāyām adhilayaṃ yam punah kurute bhavān} \\
doṣaprasaṅgo nāsmākaṃ sa śūnye noppadyate //13//
\]

13. Moreover, the objection that you make concerning emptiness cannot be a faulty consequence for us or for emptiness.

By “the objection” is meant what was stated in verses 1–6. The opponent is apparently among the “slow-witted,” for he is said to have failed to grasp emptiness, its meaning and its purpose. For this reason the objection goes wide of the mark.

\[
sarvam ca yujyate tasya śūnyatā yasya yujyate \\
sarvam na yujyate tasya śūnyam yasya na yujyate //14//
\]
14. All is possible when emptiness is possible.
   Nothing is possible when emptiness is impossible.

By “all” is here meant the central teachings of Buddhism, which the opponent claimed the Madhyamaka doctrine of emptiness jeopardized. Candrakīrti explains that when, for instance, it is acknowledged that everything is devoid of intrinsic nature, then dependent origination becomes possible, and this in turn makes it possible for the Buddha’s account of the origin and cessation of suffering to be correct. To deny that all things are empty, on the other hand, is tantamount to claiming that there exist things that are not dependently originated, and this undermines Buddhism’s core tenets.

\[
\text{sa tvāṁ doṣān ātmaniḥ ān asmāsu paripātayan} \\
\text{aśvam evābhīrūḍbhaḥ sann aśvam evāśi vismṛtah} \quad ||15||
\]

15. You, throwing your own faults on us,
   are like the person mounted on a horse who forgets the horse.

It is the opponent, and not the Mādhyamika, whose view calls into question the Buddha’s Dharma. Candrakīrti explains that the opponent is like someone who rebukes another for stealing a horse, forgetting that he is mounted on that very horse.

\[
\text{svabhāvād yadi bhāvānāṁ sadbhāvam anupaśyasi} \\
\text{ahetupratyayān bhāvāṁs tvam evaṁ sati paśyasi} \quad ||16||
\]

16. If you look upon existents as real intrinsically,
   in that case you regard existents as being without cause and conditions.

\[
\text{kāryaṁ ca kāraṇaṁ caiva kartāraṁ karaṇaṁ kriyāṁ} \\
\text{utpādaṁ ca nirdham ca phalam ca pratibādhase} \quad ||17||
\]
17. Effect and cause, as well as agent, instrument and act, arising and ceasing, and fruit—all these you thereby deny.

If things have intrinsic nature, then they cannot originate in dependence on causes and conditions. This in turn means that none of the components of the causal relation—cause, effect, and so forth—can exist. For the arguments meant to show that things with intrinsic nature could not undergo dependent origination see chapters 12, 15, and 20.

\[
yah \text{ pratītyasamutpādaḥ śūnyatāṁ tāṁ pracakṣmahe} / \\
śā prajñāaptir upādāya pratipat saiva madhyamā \mid 18 \mid
\]

18. Dependent origination we declare to be emptiness.

It [emptiness] is a dependent concept; just that is the middle path.

This is the most celebrated verse of the work, but some care is required in understanding it. Candrakīrti explains that when something like a sprout or a consciousness originates in dependence on causes and conditions (respectively the seed being in warm moist soil, and there being contact between sense faculty and object), its so doing means that it arises without intrinsic nature. And anything that arises without intrinsic nature is empty or devoid of intrinsic nature. On this understanding of 18ab, emptiness is not the same thing as dependent origination; it is rather something that follows from dependent origination. Anything that is dependently originated must be empty, but this leaves it open whether there are empty things that are not dependently originated.

To say of emptiness that it is a dependent concept is to say that it is like the chariot, a mere conceptual fiction. Since the chariot is a mere conceptual fiction because it lacks intrinsic nature (it is only conceived of in dependence on its parts, so its nature is wholly borrowed from its
parts), it would then follow that emptiness is likewise without intrinsic nature. That is, emptiness is itself empty. Emptiness is not an ultimately real entity nor a property of ultimately real entities. Emptiness is no more than a useful way of conceptualizing experience. On this point see also 13.7 and 18.11.

For the notion of the Buddha’s teachings as a middle path, see 15.7. To call emptiness the middle path is to say that it avoids the two extreme views of being and nonbeing. It avoids the extreme view of being by denying that there are ultimately real existents, things with intrinsic nature. But at the same time it avoids the extreme view of nonbeing by denying that ultimate reality is characterized by the absence of being. It is able to avoid both extremes because it denies that there is such a thing as the ultimate nature of reality.

\[
apratītya samutpanno dharmāḥ kaścin na vidyate / 
\text{yasmāt tasmād aśūnyo hi dharmāḥ kaścin na vidyate} //19//
\]

19. There being no dharma whatsoever that is not dependently originated,
it follows that there is also no dharma whatsoever that is non-empty.

Candrakīrti quotes Āryadeva to this effect:

Never is there anywhere the existence of anything that is not dependently originated, hence never is there anything anywhere that is eternal. (CŚ 9.2)
Space and the like are thought to be permanent by ordinary people, but the clear-sighted do not see [external] objects in them even by their purified worldly cognition. (CŚ 9.3)

While common sense, as well as many non-Buddhist philosophers, holds that space is a real, eternal entity, most (though not all) Bud-
dhists deny this. (See Candrakīrti’s commentary on CŚ 9.5 for a representative argument against the reality of space.) But note that there is no argument given here to establish that all dharmas originate in dependence on causes and conditions. So the present argument for the conclusion that all things are empty seems to rely on our having already accepted the premise that everything ultimately real is dependently originated.

\[ yady aśūnyam idaṁ sarvam udayo nāsti na vyayaḥ | \\
\textit{caturṇām āryasatyānām} abhāvas te prasajyate //20// \]

20. If all this is non-empty, there is neither origination nor cessation.
   It follows for you that there is the nonexistence of the four noble truths.

Nāgārjuna here begins to make good on his claim in verses 13–14 that it is the opponent’s view and not the Mādhyamika’s that undermines the basic teachings of Buddhism. In verse 1 the opponent charged that emptiness falsified the four noble truths. The response here is that if things were non-empty or had intrinsic nature, then they would be eternal. The next five verses spell out how this would falsify each of the four noble truths.

\[ apratītya samutpannam kuto duḥkhaṁ bhavisyati | \\
anityam uktam duḥkhaṁ hi tat svābhāvye na vidyate //21// \]

21. How will suffering come to be if it is not dependently originated?
   Indeed the impermanent was declared to be suffering, and it does not exist if there is intrinsic nature.

The first noble truth is the claim that there is suffering. But the Buddha also said that suffering is due to impermanence. And that which
has intrinsic nature, and so is not dependently originated, must be permanent. So if what is real has intrinsic nature, then suffering does not really exist.

svabhāvato vidyamānaṁ kim punah samudesyate /
tasmāt samudayo nāsti śūnyatāṁ pratibādhah //22//

22. How will something that exists intrinsically arise again? Therefore the arising of suffering does not exist for one who denies emptiness.

The second noble truth concerns how it is that suffering arises in dependence on causes and conditions. But if suffering were a real entity with intrinsic nature, then it would have existed from all past eternity. Hence causes and conditions could only bring about a second arising of suffering. And it is agreed by all that existing things do not undergo a second coming into existence. Thus the denial of emptiness entails the rejection of the second noble truth.

na nirodhaḥ svabhāvena sato duḥkhasya vidyate /
svabhāvaparyavasthānān nirodhaṃ pratibādhase //23//

23. There is no cessation of a suffering that exists intrinsically. You deny cessation through your maintaining intrinsic nature.

The third noble truth claims that there is also such a thing as the cessation of suffering. But things with intrinsic nature do not undergo cessation. So this noble truth must also be rejected if emptiness is denied.

svābhāvye sati mārgasya bhāvanā nopapadyate /
athāsau bhāvyate mārgah svābhāvyam te na vidyate //24//
24. The practice of a path that exists intrinsically is not possible. But if this path is practiced, then you must say it does not have intrinsic nature.

The fourth noble truth claims there is a path to the cessation of suffering. This path consists in a variety of practices that are said to result in the attainment of nirvāṇa. But practices involve conduct, and conduct involves change: To practice meditation, for instance, one must begin meditating at a certain time and then cease at another time. If things existed with intrinsic nature, then those things could not change in such ways. So the view that things exist with intrinsic nature entails that there can be no path. If, on the other hand, there is practice of a path, then it cannot have intrinsic nature, since practice requires change, and things with intrinsic nature do not change.

\[
yadā duḥkham samudayo nirodhaś ca na vidyate |
mārgo duḥkhaniruddhaṁ tvāṁ katamāḥ prāpayiṣyati ||25||
\]

25. When there is neither suffering nor the arising and cessation of suffering, then what kind of path will lead you to the cessation of suffering?

Moreover, a path cannot lead to a nonexistent destination. And if suffering has intrinsic nature, it can neither arise nor cease. So no path could lead to the cessation of suffering. Hence the promise of the fourth noble truth is once again called into question by the opponent’s thesis.

\[
svabhāvenāparijñānam yadi tasya punah katham |
parijñānam su kila svabhāvah samavasthitah ||26||
\]
26. If noncomprehension of suffering is intrinsic, how will there later be its comprehension? Isn’t an intrinsic nature said to be immutable?

The opponent claimed in verse 2 that the four constituent activities of the path would not exist if all things were empty. The first of those is comprehension of suffering and its causes. The present argument is that if the opponent were right that things have intrinsic natures, then the comprehension of suffering could not occur. To say that such comprehension takes place is to say that at one time suffering has the nature of not being comprehended and at a later time it has the nature of being comprehended. But if the natures of things are intrinsic, then their natures cannot undergo change. So either suffering is never comprehended or else it is always comprehended. In either case there cannot be the activity of coming to comprehend its nature and causes.

prabhānasākṣātkarāṇe bhāvanā caivam eva te /
parijñāvan na yujyante catvāry api phalāni ca ||27||

27. In the same manner, abandonment, personal realization, and practice, like comprehension, are impossible for you, and so too the four fruits.

Abandonment, personal realization, and contemplative practice were the other three of the four activities mentioned by the opponent in verse 2. The same considerations that ruled out an activity of comprehension also apply to these three, and so all four components of the path turn out to be impossible under the opponent’s supposition that real things have intrinsic nature.

The four fruits are the results of these activities. In verse 3 the opponent argued that in the absence of the four activities, there cannot be
the four fruits. Nāgārjuna agrees but uses this as a reason to reject not emptiness but the view that there is intrinsic nature.

svabhāvenānadhigatam yat phalam tat punah katham |
śakyam samadhigantuṃ syāt svabhāvan parigṛhṇataḥ ||28||

28. For those holding that there is intrinsic nature, if the lack of acquisition of the fruit is intrinsic, how would it be possible to acquire it later?

A fruit is something that one obtains at some particular time, not having had it at an earlier time. If there are intrinsic natures, then the nature of not having a certain fruit (such as arhatship) would be intrinsic. But then whatever had that nature could not come to have the quite different nature of acquiring the fruit. So once again there could not be the four fruits.

phalābhāve phalasthā no na santi pratipannakāḥ |
saṃgho nāsti na cet santi te 'ṣtau puruṣapudgalāḥ ||29||

29. If the fruits are nonexistent, then there are neither the strivers after nor the attainers of those fruits.

The Saṃgha does not exist if the eight kinds of person do not exist.

abhāvāc cāryasatyānāṃ saddharmo ’pi na vidyate |
dharme cāsati saṃgha ca kathāṃ buddho bhavisyati ||30||

30. And because of the nonexistence of the noble truths, the true Dharma does not exist either.

Dharma and Saṃgha being nonexistent, how will a Buddha come to be?
Nāgārjuna here simply repeats the charges of the opponent in verses 3cd–5ab. Only now of course the charges are directed not at the propo-
ponent of emptiness but at those who hold there are things with intrinsic
nature.

\[
apratītyāpi bodhiṃ ca tava buddhah prasajyate |
\]
\[
apratītyāpi buddhaṃ ca tava bodhiḥ prasajyate ///31///
\]

31. And it follows for you that there can even be a buddha not
dependent on enlightenment.
It follows for you as well that there can even be enlighten-
ment not dependent on a buddha.

If the state of being a buddha is intrinsic, then having that state can-
not be dependent on other factors, such as attaining enlightenment.
Likewise if being enlightened is an intrinsic nature, then its occurrence
cannot depend on the existence of anything else, such as an enlight-
ened being. Hence it should be possible for enlightenment to exist all
by itself, without any locus.

\[
yāś cābuddhaḥ svabhāvena sa bodhāya ghaṭann api |
\]
\[
na bodhisattvacaryāyāṃ bodhiṃ te ’dhigamiṣyati ///32///
\]

32. One who is unenlightened by intrinsic nature, though that
one strives for enlightenment,
will not, according to you, attain enlightenment in the course
of the bodhisattva’s practice.

The bodhisattva is someone who, while unenlightened, aspires to
become a buddha and seeks to attain that status by engaging in the
practices necessary to accumulate the requisite skills. Such conduct
would be pointless if such natures as being unenlightened were intrin-
sic. Hence no one could ever become a buddha.
33. Moreover, no one will ever perform either good or bad actions.

What is there that is to be done with regard to the non-empty? For what has intrinsic nature is not done.

In verse 6 the opponent accused the Mādhyamika of removing all reason to engage in any sort of conduct, whether good or bad. Here the response is that if there is intrinsic nature, then there can be no reason to perform any action. To perform an action—to do something—is to bring about a state of affairs that did not obtain earlier. If things have intrinsic nature, then any state of affairs that does not obtain at one time must retain that nature through all time. So our conduct could not result in something being done (whether good or bad).

34. For you, indeed, there is fruit even without good or bad actions;
for you there is no fruit conditioned by good or bad actions.

If things exist with intrinsic nature, then such karmic fruits as rebirth into pleasant and painful states cannot depend for their occurrence on performance of good and bad deeds. For anything that exists with intrinsic nature has its nature independently of other things. So although we may want to obtain pleasant fruits and avoid painful fruits, doing the right and shunning the evil will be utterly pointless in this regard.
Or if, for you, the fruit is conditioned by good or bad actions, how is it that for you the fruit, being originated from good or bad actions, is non-empty?

To say that fruit is determined by good or bad actions is to say that fruit originates in dependence on such conduct. And if everything dependently originated is devoid of intrinsic nature (as was claimed in verse 18), it follows that fruit cannot be non-empty, cannot be something that has intrinsic nature. So the opponent cannot maintain both that fruit is determined by good and bad actions and that fruit is non-empty.

You also deny all worldly modes of conduct when you deny emptiness as dependent origination.

By “worldly modes of conduct” is meant just those basic activities that go to make up the behavior of our everyday lives. Candrakīrti lists coming, going, cooking, reading, and standing as examples. Since these are also dependently originated, their occurrence is incompatible with the claim that things are non-empty or have intrinsic nature.

There would be nothing whatsoever that was to be done, action would be uncommenced, and the agent would not act, should emptiness be denied.
To say of an action that it should be done is to say that it should be caused to occur. This can be true only if actions can originate in dependence on causes and conditions. If real things have intrinsic nature, then they do not originate in dependence on cause and conditions. Hence if real things are non-empty, there can be nothing that is to be done. Similar reasoning leads to the conclusions that no action can commence or begin and that nothing can be an agent of an action.

\[ \text{ajātam aniruddhaṃ ca kūṭastham ca bhavisyati} / \\
\text{vicitrābhir avasthābhīh svabhāve rabitam jagat} \] ||38||

38. The world would be unproduced, unceased, and unchangeable, it would be devoid of its manifold appearances, if there were intrinsic nature.

It is a fundamental fact about our experience that the world presents itself in a variety of different ways. The claim here is that this fact would be inexplicable if there were intrinsic nature. For then new states of the world could not come into existence, and old states could not go out of existence. The world could not undergo any change in how it appears to us.

\[ \text{asaṃprāptasya ca prāptir duḥkhaparyantakarma ca} / \\
\text{sarvakleśaprabhānam ca yady aśūnyaṃ na vidyate} \] ||39||

39. The obtaining of what is not yet obtained, activity to end suffering, the abandonment of all the defilements—none of these exists if all this is non-empty.

It is not only worldly conduct that is undermined by the view that things have intrinsic nature. Conduct meant to bring about the end of
suffering is likewise threatened. The reasoning is the same as in verses 36–38. If, for instance, the defilements (see 17.26) are not abandoned at an earlier time, nothing one can do can bring it about that they are abandoned later.

\[
yah \text{ pratītyasamutpādam paśyatīdam sa paśyati} \\
dubkham samudayam caiva nirodham mārgam eva ca \parallel 40 \parallel
\]

40. He who sees dependent origination sees this: suffering, arising, cessation, and the path.

The four noble truths are referred to as the truths of (1) suffering, (2) arising (of suffering), (3) cessation (of suffering), and (4) the path (to the cessation of suffering). So the claim here is that one cannot understand the four noble truths without understanding dependent origination. Of course most Buddhists would agree with this claim. But in the present context, it means that one cannot grasp the four noble truths without recognizing that all things are empty.